

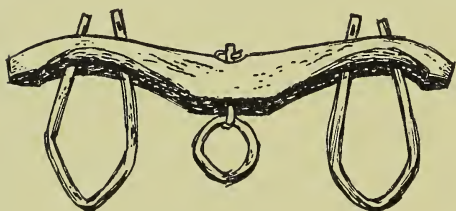
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Abraham Lincoln, Meade, Lee &  
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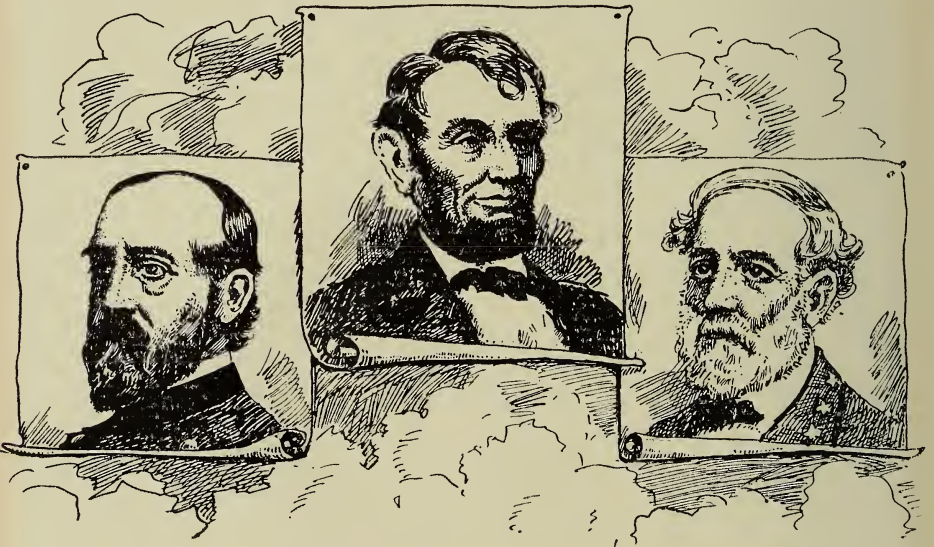
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To Albert H. Griffith  
with kind regards of the  
author

Joseph Benjamin Oarleaf  
12/20/29

# LINCOLN MEADE-LEE. GETTYSBURG



BY  
JOSEPH BENJAMIN OAKLEAF

←————→  
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# Abraham Lincoln, Meade, Lee and Gettysburg



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*"Your golden opportunity is gone and I  
am distressed immeasurably because of it."  
—Lincoln to Meade.*

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## ABRAHAM LINCOLN, MEADE, LEE AND GETTYSBURG



Abraham Lincoln was human, very much so. He had his likes and dislikes, like any other human being. If Abraham Lincoln's thoughts concerning his friends and his enemies, his likes and dislikes, his trials and tribulations had been put into writing by him, we should then have excellent reasons why he did certain things and why he failed to do other certain things.

It is necessary to read between the lines of the written page in order to understand him as he should and wanted to be understood.

Many, many times he was sorely disappointed in his Generals, from whom he expected much. It is true that he goaded them time and time again, evidently hoping that he might stir them to anger or resentment. He practically treated them as children, hoping by that method to arouse them to action and to prove to himself that they were capable of doing even more than he expected of them, and that a layman could instruct them in military tactics.

All of the letters written to his Generals bristle with military tactics; but from whom he acquired such knowledge has not been vouchsafed to us to know, yet we do know that he had not "Sat at the feet of a Master."

No doubt his Generals, in reading the suggestions from the President, were at loss to understand from what source the President derived his knowledge of military affairs, for he was truly a skilful tactician.

Was there a "power behind the throne"? Claim has been made to that effect, but it has not been clearly

established. There was no General in his army who was able to take issue with President Lincoln upon questions concerning military tactics.

The first three days of July, 1863, were Abraham Lincoln's Gethsemane. If Lee should win at Gettysburg, what would be the result on the Northern armies as to future operations? Would it mean that the North would have to sue for peace? Abraham Lincoln did not express his thoughts to anyone during those three eventful days, but he bore his agony in a silence truly phenomenal.

General Lee concluded to stake all his future, his men—everything under him and in his power on the result of the battle which was about to occur in and about Gettysburg.

We must all concede that General Meade was not the equal of Lee or Grant in generalship. If he had been, then the battle of Gettysburg would have been the end of the conflict between the North and the South.

Abraham Lincoln was sorely grieved at the failure of General Meade to follow up the advantage he had gained in his victory at Gettysburg. Why Meade did not do so, we do not know, for he has not spoken on the question. No one knows, but evidently Meade felt that his men had done all that could be expected, and he was glad to be victorious, even at the price of allowing Lee to escape.

Nevertheless, Abraham Lincoln rejoiced over the result at the close of the day on July third. It was the happiest day he had had in the White House.

Grant's success at Vicksburg, and Meade's victory at Gettysburg were truly shadows of coming events, and Abraham Lincoln was satisfied that it was only a matter of time when the erring brothers of the South would lay

down their arms and return to civil life and become part again, of a glorious and united country under one government and one flag.

The month of June, 1863, was the most trying month that Abraham Lincoln had yet experienced. The South was at the very peak of its power. The South was united, supporting, not criticizing, its leaders. The North not only had to fight the enemy in the field, but also had to withstand the jibes and taunts of the opposition within its own borders.

In the beginning of the month of June, 1863, there was a great deal of worry at Washington, for evidence made it clear that Lee had an opening for an invasion of the North. Heretofore, all the fighting had been done South of the Mason-Dixon Line, but now the North was called upon to face the invading foe.

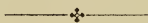
During the preceding month, the South had sustained a very severe loss in the death of Stonewall Jackson, General Lee's most aggressive General. He was not killed by the enemy, but was actually killed by the fire of his own men.

On the third of May, Hooker had been injured, on account of which, for a number of hours, he was rendered incapable of command. In his testimony before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, he testified:

“When I returned from Chancellorsville I felt that I had fought no battle; in fact, I had more men than I could use, and I fought no general battle for the reason that I could not get my men in position to do so; probably no more than three or three and a half corps on the right were engaged in the fight.”

Hooker had been defeated at Chancellorsville, and Burnside at Fredericksburg; still the President and his Secretary of War had faith in Hooker.

Lee's wonderful victories during the preceding few months gave the South a flattering hope of final success and the men in the field as well as the people at home were highly elated over the unbroken record of successes on the Virginia battlefields. These events encouraged Lee to make a dash for an invasion of the North.



### EVENTS LEADING UP TO THE CLASH AT GETTYSBURG.

General Hooker had given his opinion that he was satisfied it was General Lee's intention to capture Washington, and therefore he concluded that it would be a strategic movement if he would attack the Confederate rear, to which plan Abraham Lincoln demurred, showing thereby his wonderful generalship.

On the fifth of June, he wrote Hooker as follows:

"In case you find Lee coming to the north of the Rappahannock, I would by no means cross to the south of it. If he should leave a rear force at Fredericksburg, tempting you to fall upon it, it would fight in intrenchments and have you at disadvantage, and so, man for man, worst you at that point, while his main force would in some way be getting an advantage of you northward. In one word, I would not take any risk of being entangled upon the river, like an ox jumped half over a fence and liable to be torn by dogs front and rear, without a fair chance to gore one way or kick the other."

That letter from Lincoln, no doubt, convinced General Hooker that Abraham Lincoln was a better General than he.

A few days after General Hooker had received the letter, he became convinced that a major portion of General Lee's

army was moving towards the Shenandoah Valley, and he concluded to make a quick and direct march to capture Richmond. However, that did not suit the President, which again proved that the Chief was a better General than Hooker, for he wrote him as follows:

“If left to me, I would not go south of the Rappahannock upon Lee’s moving north of it. If you had Richmond invested to-day, you would not be able to take it in twenty days, meanwhile, your communications, and with them your army, would be ruined. I think Lee’s army, and not Richmond, is your true objective point. If he comes toward the upper Potomac, follow on his flank and on his inside track, shortening your lines while he lengthens his. Fight him, too, when opportunity offers. If he stays where he is, fret him and fret him.”

The authorities at Washington were unable to get satisfactory information as to General Lee’s intentions, for General Lee had so camouflaged matters that it kept the authorities at Washington guessing as to what his plans were. On June 14, Abraham Lincoln telegraphed General Hooker as follows:

“So far as we can make out here, the enemy have Milroy surrounded at Winchester, and Tyler at Martinsburg. If they could hold out a few days, could you help them? If the head of Lee’s army is at Martinsburg, and the tail of it on the plank road between Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, the animal must be very slim somewhere. Could you not break him?”

The foregoing telegram shows what wonderful military knowledge the President possessed.

General Lee did not halt in his northern movement. He crossed the Potomac above Harper’s Ferry and continued his northward march through Maryland and into Pennsylvania.

General Hooker profited by the advice of the President, and very prudently followed General Lee on the "inside track."

At this point in the maneuvers of the two contending forces, according to appearances, trouble arose between General Hooker and General Halleck.

For sometime there had been irritation and jealousy between the two and it finally became so acute that General Halleck refused comparatively minor requests and thereupon General Hooker became petulant and asked that he be relieved from command.

When Hooker became thus petulant, the President saw that his usefulness was at an end, and, contrary to his usual caution, for he had repeatedly said that he did not believe in "swapping horses in the middle of the stream," he did "swap," and he appointed General George G. Meade as Hooker's successor.

General Meade had most severely criticized General Hooker since the Chancellorsville battle. He had been equally as severe a critic as General Hooker was of Burnside after the Fredericksburg engagement.

General Lee's onward march caused insubordination among the Northern Generals to disappear, for the ensuing campaign became a very strenuous one, and the new and retiring leaders of the army of the Potomac exchanged compliments in General Orders with the utmost chivalric courtesy, and the Northern Army continued its northward march with undiminished ardor and unbroken step.

When General Meade crossed the Pennsylvania Line, General Lee was far ahead, threatening the capital of the State.

At this time, we cannot conceive of the terror that spread throughout the North among the farms and villages that

were in the line of the invading foe, and a panic was almost created in the large cities.

Six of the adjoining States were hurriedly sending forces, under the command of General Couch, to the banks of the Susquehanna, where it was certain that General Lee had intended to cross the river. General Lee, finding the Susquehanna too well guarded at the point where he had intended to cross, turned his forces directly east and General Meade, marching toward the north, brought the opposing armies into a certain contact and collision at the town of Gettysburg.

General Meade was ready to fight a defensive, but not an offensive battle, and had carefully prepared to receive the attack of General Lee's forces on the line of Pipe Creek.

On the afternoon of July 1, the advance of each army met and engaged in a terrific conflict for the possession of Gettysburg.

General Meade, on ascertaining the nature of the fight and the location of the ground, decided to immediately accept the conflict and thereupon ordered his whole force forward, and thus made this the principal and most decisive battlefield of the whole war.

The Union troops made a stubborn effort to hold the town of Gettysburg, but were driven out by the Confederates who took position in a half circle on the west, north and east.

The seeming defeat in the first day's battle proved to be an advantage to the Union forces, for they were then enabled to establish themselves firmly on Cemetery Ridge, which proved to be a most advantageous position, for the several rocky elevations and crests of boulders making a great curve from Round Top on the west with Culp's

Hill on the east and Cemetery Ridge in the center, were of themselves almost a natural fortress and, with the hurried intrenchments thrown up by the expert veterans of General Meade, became an almost impregnable fortress.

Beyond, to the west and north lay a wide valley, and parallel with it lay Seminary Ridge, on which the Confederate army had established itself with equal rapidity.

It was also General Lee's hope that he would be allowed to fight a defensive battle, but being arrested in his eastward march in a hostile country, he became convinced that he could not afford to stand still and wait for the coming of the foe.

Accordingly, early on the morning of July second, the two commanding gladiators met. During the night preceding, General Meade's Council of War, which coincided with him in his own judgment, decided to stand and fight it out, while General Lee, against the advice of Longstreet, his ablest General, with equal decision determined to risk the chance of final and determined attack.

General Meade had his fighting clothes on. He was determined that it was now or never. The world knew the result the next day.

When darkness enveloped the Gettysburg battlefield, on the third day of the conflict, the Confederates' dream of taking Philadelphia and dictating terms of peace and separation at Independence Hall, where our independence had been declared eighty-seven years before, was gone forever.

It appears to us, who are now reading the events of those days that General Lee did not, at the close of the day, on July third, fully realize his great defeat, and it is also true that General Meade did not realize the won-



derful victory he had achieved, for if he had realized the magnitude of it, during the next ten days he would have changed history.

The Gettysburg battlefield truly became a slaughter house. Three thousand killed, fourteen thousand wounded and five thousand captured and missing of the Union army, and twenty-six hundred killed, twelve thousand wounded and five thousand missing of the Confederates, told the tale.

The next day, July Fourth, being a national holiday, both armies decided to rest.

What General Meade was doing in the meantime we do not know, but we do know that he was very much surprised on the morning of the fifth to find that the Confederate Army had disappeared and was retreating with great rapidity towards Harper's Ferry.

The retreating army was unable to cross the Potomac by reason of its banks running full because of recent heavy rains, and Meade having followed, caught up with Lee's army on July 10. Learning that fact, President Lincoln's stock of hope went above par, for he was absolutely sure that General Meade would attack and capture the Confederate force under General Lee.

General Meade was praised, but he was also repeatedly urged, both by the President and General Halleck, to renew the attack. Meade hesitated, and this hesitation on the part of General Meade was favorable to General Lee. We must not blame General Meade too much, for his Council of War did not believe in attacking Lee, for fear of a defeat. It was subsequently proven that they were wrong and that they should have supported their General in his determination.

On July 13, General Lee and his entire army recrossed the Potomac in retreat. When that news reached Washington, the President on July 14 wrote a letter of criticism to General Meade, expressing his great disappointment, which reflects the intensity of the President's feeling at the escape of General Lee, whom he felt Meade had had in his grasp. Had General Meade attacked General Lee's army then and there the war would have practically been ended. The letter Lincoln wrote to Meade was not sent, and was never seen by Meade. It was found among the President's papers, by his secretaries, after his death. The letter is in part as follows:

“The case, summarily stated, is this: You fought and beat the enemy at Gettysburg, and, of course, to say the least, his loss was as great as yours. He retreated, and you did not, as it seemed to me, pressing him; but a flood in the river detained him till, by slow degrees, you were again upon him. You had at least twenty thousand veteran troops directly with you, and as many more raw ones within supporting distance, all in addition to those who fought with you at Gettysburg, while it was not possible that he had received a single recruit, and yet you stood and let the flood run down, bridges be built and the enemy move away at his leisure, without attacking him. \* \* \* \* Again, my dear general, I do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee's escape. He was within your easy grasp, and to have closed upon him would in connection with our other late successes, have ended the war. As it is, the war will be prolonged indefinitely. If you could not safely attack Lee last Monday, how can you possibly do so south of the river, when you can take with you very few more than two thirds of the forces you then had in hand? It would be unreasonable to expect, and I do not expect [that] you can now effect much. Your golden opportunity is gone, and I am distressed immeasurably because of it.”

## LINCOLN'S FORGIVING SPIRIT.

The letter, which was not sent, showed how deeply the President was grieved through General Meade's fault of omission. Nevertheless, the President was full of the spirit of forgiveness and he quickly forgave and was thankful for the measure of success which had been gained; therefore, he did not sign nor send the letter.

The President was pleased that the victory was with the Union forces and he now could see the end of the mighty conflict that was raging between the North and the South.

Grant had been successful at Vicksburg, General Meade had been successful at Gettysburg, and the President knew his prayers had surely been answered in no uncertain way, and he must have been assured that the destiny of the Republic, of which he was the head, was in the hands of Jehovah.

There have been those who have said that "It may have been for the best that General Meade did not follow up the advantage he had gained." We cannot agree with such an opinion, for if it had been for the best, Abraham Lincoln was wise enough to have known it, and if he had thought it was for the best, he would not have said in his letter to General Meade, "I do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee's escape;" nor would he have said, "With our other late successes would have ended the war;" nor "Your golden opportunity is gone and I am distressed immeasurably because of it;" neither would he have said, "As it is, the war will be prolonged indefinitely."

Think of the agony which President Lincoln endured previous to writing to General Meade, when he had to tell Meade, "The war will be prolonged indefinitely!"

The then present burden had been heavier than he could bear, and now he had this additional burden of General Meade's failure to take advantage of the opportunity to end the war, and, thinking of the opportunity which President Lincoln told him was a "golden opportunity," the President burst out in uncontrollable grief and added, "I am distressed immeasurably because of it."

The letter to General Meade gives a wonderful insight into Abraham Lincoln's ability to grasp the situation regarding military tactics, and to pour out the burden of his soul in a letter that General Meade never saw.

No doubt, after that letter was written, he read it over several times, but the distressed President, with a sigh, put the paper away and said to himself, "Because of General Meade's failure to grasp his golden opportunity, which would have ended the war, the war will now be prolonged indefinitely."

For nearly two years more President Lincoln was compelled to carry the added heavy burden of which he was finally relieved by what took place at Appomattox "under the famous apple tree" on the 9th of April, 1865.

If General Meade had not allowed his "golden opportunity" to pass, it would have been General Meade to whom Lee would have surrendered, and not to General Grant.



